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ABSTRACT

This article discusses English-language programs in Iran and their shortcomings. Teachers are inadequately prepared, classrooms are overcrowded, materials are not properly used, and basic writing skills have not been taught. To overcome these problems, the language skills of the teachers must be developed and teachers must be acquainted with modern techniques of foreign-language teaching. Some university programs have been improved. The greatest motivation to developing English-language programs comes from the wealth of scientific and technological knowledge that now exists in English. (VM)

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN IRAN

Jeris E. Strain

A characteristic description of the person who is the product of overseas language instruction is that his speech is often unintelligible due to poor and incorrect pronunciation, what he hears is not clearly understood and must be repeated several times, his writing reflects confused syntactic patterns, unlearned grammatical concepts, and misused lexical items, and his reading is not only painstakingly slow, it also lacks comprehension.

All of this the individual achieves in approximately four hours of English language instruction per week often over a period of some six years. Such a wasteful squandering of good intentions, time, effort, money and potential is seldom if ever matched in other fields of education.

Paradoxically the English language has steadily gained itself a stronger and firmer foothold in many nations during recent decades, thanks to such factors as an American or British presence, economic and status incentives closely related to business, medicine, and higher education, the search for technological progress, and the availability of English language films, music and literature.

And all of this comes together in the form of an ever increasing demand for English language instruction, scattered flurries of activity, and individual instances of dedication. Very rarely is there a positive and systematic effort of sufficient magnitude to establish quality instruction or if improvements are introduced, to maintain them until they become viable institutional practices.

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Iran as a nation has included bilingualism in the objectives of its educational system, particularly at the higher education level; moreover, it has and is taking measures to insure that this objective is attained. Implementation of the measures, however, has been very slow to take form and even more difficult to maintain, especially since inertia and tradition have merged with a rapidly increasing demand for instruction, a demand which is itself hamstrung by a lack of quality teachers, by a lack of quality teaching materials, and by misunderstandings about the essentials of second language teaching and learning.

From the standpoint of linguistics English should not be an overly difficult language for a speaker of Persian to learn. The phonology of the two languages is fairly similar: Persian has a six vowel system whereas English has an eleven vowel system, there are two diphthongs to be mastered, (*cow*, *boy*), and the consonant system of English contains only three major elements to be mastered (*we*, *thin*, *this*), three that are basically articulatory learning tasks.¹ The morphology and syntax of English present a somewhat different range of learning tasks for speakers of Persian than they do for speakers of other Indo-European languages; however, in the main these also appear less complex than those characteristic of speakers of Slavic, Germanic, and Romance languages. The Arabic element in Persian does introduce complexities; however, these appear to be largely lexical in nature.² Learning the English alphabet, on the other hand, not to mention English spelling requires a great deal of effort on the part of the Iranian, both in terms of learning a new system of symbols to represent sounds and of learning a writing system that extends from left to right rather than right to left. Finally, while one may question the present adequacy of Persian as a language for communication within the matrices of science and technology, the language has long been recognized as a highly developed literary medium, particularly in the realm of poetry.

Be that as it may, English language instruction in Iran is weak. The Iranian student's six years of time, interest, and effort, not to mention that of the teacher, result with relatively few exceptions in actual language abilities which range from poor to mediocre. Conversely, the same students placed in intensive English courses outside Iran often excel in *apparent* language ability, a situation that unfortunately too often contributes to diminished efforts on the part of the student and to a seeming but largely superficial command of English.

While teaching-learning conditions in Iran may not be dissimilar from those in other parts of the world, they are much more extreme than Modern Language teaching conditions in the United States. Motivation, for example, is very high; more than 90% of the students elect to take English in preference to other foreign languages. Class size, teacher preparation, adequate textbooks and teaching materials, on the other hand, are very serious: class size often approaches seventy, a large percentage of the English teachers do not know English, and teaching methods and materials tend to be outdated or not understood.

American Efforts

American efforts to officially participate in the improvement of English language instruction in Iran date back to the establishment of the Iran American Society (IAS) in 1950.³ Two years later the English teaching sec-

¹ These learning tasks differ sharply from the mastery of such complex distinctions as /r/-/l/ among Japanese and medial /d/-/ð/ among Spanish speakers.

² See, for example, M. A. Jazayery, "The Arabic Element in Persian Grammar," *Iran, Journal of Persian Studies*, Vol. VIII, pages 115-124.

³ Nye-Dorry, G., Memo to Peace Corps Director—Iran, October 6, 1964, 4 pages.

tion of the IAS had attracted a student body of three to four hundred students and by 1959 the number of students taking English courses had risen to nearly 4000. Today approximately 5000 students are taught English at the Iran American Society each day, an annual total of approximately 10,000 individual students.

Fulbright activities also began in 1950 and up until 1959⁴ consisted of providing a few English literature professors for various universities, study grants for Iranian English teachers to go to the United States for training in English and in TEFL methodology, and partial support for one three-week summer seminar for Iranian returnee English teachers and selected English teachers who had not yet been abroad.

In 1959 the Fulbright program emphasized the teaching of English in Iranian secondary schools and five American English teachers were assigned to the secondary school system. Under the able direction of Dr. Nye-Dorry, a Michigan trained linguist who had been actively involved in the IAS programs, these teachers visited schools and gave seminar classes for the Iranian English teachers in the cities where they were stationed. The following two years, 1960 and 1961, the Iranian Ministry of Education provided an Iranian returnee counterpart for each of the five American teachers and these teams traveled from town to town giving seminar classes which ranged from a few days in small towns to a month to six weeks in large cities. During the 1960-61 academic year alone these teams reached over 800 teachers of English in 52 locations.

Notwithstanding achievements such as this the program was discontinued in 1962, just as it had become known and had demonstrated its potential effectiveness but before it could prove itself. Instead of secondary school assignments, the 1962-63 Fulbright English teachers were sent to different universities. Since then due to Congressional action the Fulbright English program has shrunk to its present low of providing one American literature professor to one university—Tehran University.⁵

The Peace Corps initiated its English language program in Iran in 1962, the same year that the Fulbright program shifted its emphasis from the secondary school system to the university system, and it also responded to the needs of higher education by giving university assignments to its first group of TEFL Volunteers. Two years later, after considerable effort by Dr. Nye-Dorry, who was instrumental in developing this English program also, secondary school assignments were given to a group of fifteen TEFL Volunteers, most of whom reported to the chiefs of educational offices as special assistants in English teaching. In 1967 this activity expanded to a total of 135 English teachers concentrated mainly in the secondary school system. Since then it also has shrunk; moreover, two-thirds of the 65 TEFL Volunteers who now have secondary assignments will terminate by the Summer of 1971.

It was also in 1962 that the Point IV program, later USAID, expanded its activities to include a contract between Pahlavi University in Shiraz and the University of Pennsylvania. The goal of this relationship was the establishment of a modern institution of higher learning which would emphasize western science and technology, be bilingual and international, with English the second language, and attract to it many of the highly trained Iranian specialists who resided in the United States and England.

The primary role of the University of Pennsylvania has been to recruit Iranians in the United States for faculty positions at Pahlavi University and to recruit University of Pennsylvania faculty members for temporary

⁴ The Fulbright program was supplemented by the Smith-Mundt Act from 1953 to 1958.

⁵ A second American Literature professor transferred to Iran as a result of hostilities in Jordan.

appointments in priority fields at Pahlavi. Over the past four years these activities have led to appointments being offered by Pahlavi to 150 applicants out of 400 and this year alone there are twelve Penn faculty members teaching and working at Pahlavi. More recently the development of student and faculty exchange programs has been emphasized and there are now some twenty students and junior faculty members pursuing advanced degrees at Penn. Due to achievements such as these, a second five-year contract, financed entirely by Iran, was signed in 1967, when the USAID contract ended.

With regard to the Pahlavi English program, the goal of having a student body that is proficient in English as well as Persian remains a key objective of the university; in fact, it has become a goal of other Iranian universities as well. The textbooks used at Pahlavi, and in some of the other Iranian universities, are generally the same as those regularly used in American universities; the one main exception is Persian literature, history and culture. The assistance provided by the University of Pennsylvania in this field has consisted of a visiting applied linguist for 1965-1968 and the active recruitment of Direct Hire English teachers since 1967.

It is predictable when several agencies are involved in one type of activity that duplication of effort, confusion and potential if not actual politicking will take place, and in this respect Iran has been no exception. One brief example will suggest the nature of this problem for English language instruction. The same year that one university rejected a Fulbright grantee in favor of three Peace Corps TEFL Volunteers, another university had an English staff which consisted of a Fulbright Lecturer, a visiting professor from an American university, an Iranian professor just back from the United States, two instructors recruited by the British Council, several Peace Corps Volunteer instructors, one direct hire American instructor, and several Iranian instructors and assistant instructors.

Past Problems and Recommendations

Linguistic insights into effective language instruction have been and are available in Iran and numerous efforts have been and are being made; still, little if any improvement or progress seem to be taking place. The number of students studying English steadily rises, the number of English teachers gradually increases, new teaching materials appear from time to time, and official support for the learning of English continues; but instruction seems largely unchanged, at times worse. To break a lockstep where does one begin?

In the opinion of a Director General of Education in one province, eight factors have been at the root of the inadequate and unsatisfactory attainment of English language skills among Iranian students:

1. Overcrowded classes have prevented the teacher from attending to the individual needs of the students.
2. Most of the teachers, especially in beginning classes, have not possessed adequate knowledge of English nor skill to teach efficiently and effectively.
3. Some teachers have not been familiar with modern techniques of foreign language teaching.
4. Other teachers have not been able to make use of their training in the overcrowded classrooms.
5. Audio-visual aids have been insufficient and impossible to use with overcrowded classes.
6. The syllabus prescribed for the school has not been covered.

7. Students have lost interest because regulations have permitted them to graduate with a score of 0.25 (out of 20) in English if they receive a passing average in other subjects.
8. The misuse of textbooks has created inconsistencies and a lack of continuity in the English program.⁶

The opinion of a university English language teacher who has had to re-teach graduated students so that they could take university coursework in English or use English textbooks gives additional perspective:

1. The number of high schools has mushroomed but the supply of teachers to man them has fallen far behind the need.
2. Leniency has characterized academic degree programs and ad hoc teachers have been given teaching positions.
3. Inadequately prepared and uncertain teachers have passed this state of mind on to students.
4. Some teachers have stuck to a single textbook and a line by line translation, have had a very poor pronunciation, have taught some traditional grammar, or have refrained from giving written assignments which take time and knowledge to correct.
5. Students have not been taught to organize a composition, to spell the most common words, to punctuate a sentence, to express themselves in writing, let alone speaking, or even to write legibly.⁷

To remedy the situation, two objectives have generally been agreed upon as the most critical: raising the language skills of the teachers and acquainting them with modern techniques of foreign language teaching. The recommendations of the Director General were as follows:

1. Establishment of graduate programs at the universities for English teachers.
2. Reducing the number of students per class.
3. Frequent seminars for teachers during the year.
4. Study abroad scholarships for the better teachers.
5. Two- or three-month Summer Camps aimed at training teachers and providing them with an English language environment.
6. Simplified texts for high school students to use.
7. Audio-visual facilities for high schools.
8. Visits to high school classes by university teachers.
9. Communication between university teachers and high school teachers regarding university requirements and classwork.
10. Discussions with the authorities regarding the graduation examination regulations.
11. Consideration of whether four periods of English per week under overcrowded conditions are sufficient.⁸

The teacher's recommendations for improving the language ability and teaching skills of teachers were the following:

1. Revision of the curriculum of the older universities and the recruitment of more up-to-date professors.

⁶ Habibi, Bahman, "The Difficulties of Teaching and Learning English in Iranian High Schools," paper presented at the 1966 Pahlavi University Conference on the teaching of English in Iranian universities.

⁷ Motamed Fereydoun, "The Crisis of the Foreign Language Teachers in Iran" *ibid.*

⁸ Habibi, B., *op. cit.*

2. Increased enrollments for prospective language teachers and a more flexible time limit for completing academic requirements, but without sacrificing the quality of instruction.
3. A minimum command of 20,000 words for language teachers plus training in linguistics.
4. A minimum of one year of study abroad plus active participation in language clubs.
5. Coursework in the history of Western Civilization plus direct contact with the customs, manners, and cultural patterns of a given people.
6. Literary texts edited for the particular needs of Iranian students with footnotes on idiomatic expressions and mythological, biblical and historical references.
7. Discouraging the scholastic method of learning and encouraging surveys, narratives and essays based on personal experiences and opinions.
8. Rewarding merit with promotions related to student success in competitive examinations.⁹

Although both views agree to a great extent on several points, their basic concerns are clearly different, as they should be. Both address the university community and look to it for assistance in meeting common problems, rather than for criticism and academic critiques.¹⁰ While a few of their recommendations represent long range ideals, some controversial, others, particularly those of the Education Department, lend themselves to immediate implementation and reflect previous or ongoing efforts.

An example of an ongoing activity, one which illustrates several of the above points, is the Summer School sponsored annually by the Ministry of Education and the British Council. In 1969 this summer school was held in Mashad and had two basic aims: to improve the command of English of the participants, particularly their spoken English, and to improve their understanding and especially their use of modern methods of teaching English to first and second year classes. One hundred and forty lower secondary teachers of English were enrolled in the summer school and were given seven hours of classwork each day for three weeks. Their program consisted of remedial English, speech practice, demonstration lessons, lesson planning, teaching practice, methodology, and classroom skills and emphasized practical performance rather than formal lectures. Each class was limited to about fifteen persons.

At the beginning of the course roughly one-third of the students had a high level of fluency in English. A similar proportion had too low a level of English to allow them to profit from instruction in English and as a result were taught methodology in Farsi the second and third week. In addition, their remedial English program was increased and at the end of the program their English attainment reflected a 13-18% average raw score improvement over their initial performance, with some individuals reportedly attaining as much as a 25% improvement.

Improvement in teaching performance was difficult to evaluate; however, an indication of their achievement was demonstrated very effectively by teachers who at the beginning of the course had maintained that it would be impossible for Iranian teachers to use the methods and techniques advocated. Their statements were based on three basic classroom problems, two

⁹ Motamed, F., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ See also J. E. Strain, "Picking Out the Thorns," *Kayhan International*, June 26, 1966.

of which were mentioned earlier: that secondary English classes often consisted of up to 70 pupils and that the pass mark for language examinations was so low that it served as a disincentive to both pupils and teachers. The third problem was that the four hours of English per week were divided into one period each for translation, dictation, reading and composition, which made it impossible to implement a predominantly oral approach. Their practice teaching demonstrations at the end of the course disproved these arguments.

At the end of the summer school several recommendations were made regarding the problems to be faced by the teachers after they returned to their respective classrooms and found themselves confronted by attitudes of traditionalism among their colleagues, by teaching problems not dealt with in the summer school, and possibly by feelings of insecurity in their own classrooms. These recommendations consisted of a call for well-trained classroom inspectors, short refresher courses in regional centers, and future summer courses for participants from specific areas.¹¹

Present Possibilities

To attempt a statement on the current state of English language instruction in Iran is to tread on quicksand, for the balance between teaching needs and responses to those needs is very fluid. Nevertheless, a degree of progress may be taking form. Compared to a decade ago more universities are emphasizing English language programs for their incoming students; in addition to Pahlavi University one can now count Mashad University, Arya Mehr University and Tehran University, the largest university in Iran, as having made major teaching commitments to what is being referred to as "service English." Moreover, new institutions of higher education are emphasizing English in their curriculum; for example, the School of Commerce, the Iranian College of Management, which opened this fall, and two Electronics Technicians Schools, which are scheduled to open their doors early next year.

Efforts to cope with the problem of staffing now consist of a graduate program at Pahlavi University for secondary English teachers, an undergraduate TESL program in the Faculty of Education at Tehran University, which unfortunately seems to be being phased out even though it just began, and eleven regional teacher training centers which are to provide two years of training for prospective English teachers. These are in addition to the Teacher Training College in Tehran which now has a group of sixty third-year students in their English program, the University of Tehran which offers a graduate program in English literature, and the undergraduate English literature programs of several universities.

At the secondary level three developments have or are taking place. First, the examination regulation for high school graduation has been revised to a minimum score of 7 out of 20 in place of the 0.25 score previously permitted. Second, the high school program is being changed from a 6-3-3 system (elementary-lower secondary-higher secondary) to a 5-3-4 system (elementary-guidance school-high school), which will add an additional year of English instruction to the existing six. And third, a new series of English textbooks is being published by the Ministry of Education, a series that is to be more relevant to the instructional needs of Iranian students than the previously used British series (E. V. Gatenby, *Direct Method*).

While English language instruction in Iran has received support from many quarters, both official and private, its most valuable resource appears

¹¹ These illustrations are drawn from a British Council report prepared by their English Language Officer R. E. Wright, "1969 Summer School for English Teachers—Mashad," July 27, 1969, 6 pages.

to have been the wealth of scientific and technological knowledge that now exists in English. To nations which, like Iran, have set their sights on industrialization and the economic and social benefits that industrialization represents, this particular knowledge is prized very highly. Thus it is little wonder that the Shah of Iran has given personal leadership to the development of means by which this wealth can be made readily available to his people. Nevertheless, implementation takes time, especially when established attitudes are deep set and more or less antagonistic to change, and when rapidly increasing demands for education outpace both the supply and the training of qualified teachers.

With this as background, one may be permitted to conclude that English language instruction abroad, though obviously different, often appears both as complex and as compelling as the language itself.